THE MINISTER AS PREACHER

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BY

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The Claims and Opportunities of the Christian Ministry

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LETTER FROM PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT
ON THE CALL OF THE NATION FOR ABLE MEN TO LEAD THE FORCES OF CHRISTIANITY

THE MINISTER AS PREACHER

If any one thinks that the preacher has been superseded by the printing press, he needs to revise his conclusions. In many quarters it is proclaimed with confidence that the day of the preacher is gone or going, and the assurance with which the declaration is made is often bewildering and sometimes convincing. Nor is this to be wondered at, for the arguments against the preacher's continued usefulness are numerous and specious. Are not books multiplying all the time, and do not men read more and more? Has not oratory been well-nigh banished from the court room and also from the halls of legislation? Are there not masterpieces of devotional and homiletical and theological literature upon which the hungry soul can feed in the library or parlor, and can rational men be expected to listen to a sermon in the church when the kings of the pulpit are willing to preach to them at home? Why then should the modern

preacher be reluctant to acknowledge that his occupation is gone?

It all sounds plausible but it convinces no one who is conversant with the facts. For twenty years I have listened to these arguments and for twenty years I have heard churches crying vociferously for preachers. The cries have come from every quarter of the land and they have increased in urgency and number each succeeding year. It is safe to say that never in the history of the Christian Church has the demand for able preachers been so widespread and so insistent as it is today. A preacher who really knows how to preach need not stand idle a single hour in the market place. Books are multiplying and so also are the demands for preachers. I do not say clergymen, but preachers. Of pastors and ecclesiastics there is probably no great scarcity, but of preachers there is a dearth which should set all friends of Christ a-thinking.

A preacher is a teacher and for teaching the age is hungry, almost ravenous. Laymen say with a sigh: "Our minister is a good man, but—" and then they go on to confess that he cannot preach. "Our minister is a faithful pastor, but—" and before another

word is added one knows the nature of the tragedy. "Our pastor has fine executive ability, he would have made a wonderful business man, but—" and here a sigh covers up what the heart feels and the tongue refuses to declare. It is a fact worth pondering that congregations of intelligent people are never satisfied unless ministered to by men who know how to preach. No other gift is a substitute for the gift of preaching. Let the clergyman excel in a dozen departments of activity, his success in them will not atone for his failure in the pulpit. People like executive ability, and they appreciate pastoral fidelity, but they die if deprived of preaching. Give them everything else but preaching, and there is a consciousness that something still is lacking. Sheep are always hungry, no matter with what skill they are shepherded, unless they are fed. A preacher is a man who feeds sheep. While the theorists go on asserting that the day of the preacher has gone, the churches keep on crying, "Give us preachers or we die!"

And no other man than a preacher can satisfy the need. Even a scholar can not. A man may be versed in all the learning of the schools, but if he is

not a preacher all his knowledge counts for nothing. Theological experts have their place, but unless they know how to preach their place is not the pulpit. One of the quarrels which the modern church has with the theological seminary of our day is that it turns out scholars, writers, sociologists, literati, and savants, and only occasionally a preacher. Let the seminaries bend all their energies to the training of effective preachers and the attitude of churches now indifferent or hostile to them will be radically changed. The churches are made up of plain people and the plain people always know what they want. Faddists may think that the day for preaching has gone by, but the churches have never been so certain as they are today that the one man most essential in the work of extending the Kingdom of God is the preacher. The founder of the Christian religion carved out a large place in His Church for the preacher, and until the place of the preacher is filled by a man who knows how to preach, the career of the Church is bound in shallows and in miseries. There are divers wise men now alive who think that preaching is *passé*, but those who see the situation as it is are constrained to confess that Paul

was divinely instructed when he declared that it has pleased the Almighty to save this world by the foolishness of preaching.

The facts, then, of experience are all against those who assert that the day for preaching is gone. The exact truth is that the day for the preacher is just dawning. Never has his field been so wide as now. Never has there been less bigotry and prejudice than today. Many of the old barriers have been broken down, and the Christian world is one, in a sense never known hitherto. No matter what branch of the Church a man may have been reared in, he is now ready to listen to any man who knows how to interpret the oracles of God. Never has the human mind been so alert and so receptive as now. Men are studying everything in the earth and in the heavens above, and in the waters which are under the earth, but they are not satisfied until they have searched the deep things of the soul. Man is spirit, and the knowledge of matter never satisfies him. He is immortal and the knowledge of the things of time leaves him hungry. Modern science has made the world no less mysterious and human life not a whit less critical and august than it has always been.

Men turn now as of old instinctively to the man of insight who can speak illuminatingly of the high things of the spirit. The whole world feels that Jesus of Nazareth has the words of eternal life, and the man who understands these words and who can interpret them in clear and convincing speech to his fellow-men is certain of a hearing.

If this is a materialistic age, it is nevertheless an age seized with an aspiration after the Infinite. The very magnitude of our material prosperity is assisting men to realize that a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses. When one looks out across the North American continent thickly dotted with large and growing cities, sees the streams of humanity pouring through the streets, notes how the multitude today, as of old, is scattered abroad like sheep which have no shepherd, and when one meditates upon the confusion of men's minds, the agitations of men's hearts, and the tremendous down-pulling forces of modern society, and when he beholds the crying need for clear-eyed, high-minded, stout-hearted prophets of the Lord who are able to interpret to these multitudes the signs of the times and to apply the principles of the Gospel of the Son

of God to the tangled problems and complicated life which modern civilization has created, he can not help wondering why a larger number of the brainiest and most virile of our college men do not see the unparalleled greatness of the opportunity and hasten to enter fields which offer amplest scope for the exercise of every talent, for the gratification of every ambition, and for the profitable expenditure of every ounce of energy with which the great and generous God has endowed the highly favored of his children.

That the human voice will ever cease to be a factor in the moulding of the lives of men and nations is incredible. The printing press has a work to do, but it can never do the work assigned by the Creator to the voice. As long as men are human they will respond to voices which have in them the music of a loving heart, and will be moved to nobler effort by tongues which have mastered the high art of persuasion. To express lofty ideas in adequate speech, this is the preacher's high vocation. He works directly with the human heart. By means of words he purifies and strengthens immortal spirits. A man of vision, he expresses in uplifting language the glories which his soul has seen.

What greater work on earth than this can any man conceive of? Jesus of Nazareth was a preacher. His greatest miracles were performed by His tongue. Men bowed before Him because no other man had ever spoken as He spoke. It was His conviction that while heaven and earth would pass away His words would never pass away. Down to the latest generation men will be set apart to the high work of causing these words to live in the hearts and homes of men. No other work will ever take precedence over this. No progress of humanity will ever render this work unnecessary. There will be seasons, now and then, no doubt, when other kinds of work, executive, pastoral, ceremonial, philanthropic will seem to have a use and glory which preaching does not have, but such seasons will be few and transitory. So long as the world exists, God will continue to ordain preachers, and these men, when baptized with the Holy Spirit, will resist every inducement to turn aside to other forms of service, saying as the Apostles said nineteen centuries ago: "We will continue stedfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the word."